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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 4891
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 002805

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DEPT FOR SCA/INS, DRL, INR/B

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL PINR KIRF IN

SUBJECT: INDIA ON THE THRESHOLD OF ELECTING ITS FIRST WOMAN
PRESIDENT

REF: NEW DELHI 2763

Classified By: DCM Geoffrey Pyatt for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On June 14, after what threatened to become an insurmountable impasse, Congress and Left Party leaders agreed on current Rajasthan Governor Pratibha Devisingh Patil as the UPA/Left nominee for President of India. A longtime Gandhi/Nehru family loyalist, Patil would be the first woman President of India. A secularist, as Governor, she refused to sign an Anti-Conversion Bill which came before her after passing the Rajasthan State Legislature. Despite Patil's nomination being a complete surprise to everyone (including the media and senior Congress members), reactions to her nomination were broadly positive. With backing from the UPA, Left, and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) (reftel), Patil should have no problem winning a majority of electoral votes on election day in mid-July. Even current Vice President (VP) Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, also a contender, will not pose a significant threat to Patil. Votes will be cast on July 19 and a winner declared on July 21. End Summary.

Breaking the Impasse

¶2. (SBU) On June 14, after the Left rejected a series of Congress picks: Home Minister Shivraj Patil, Jammu and Kashmir royalty and Member of Parliament Karan Singh, or Minister of Power Sushilkumar Shinde, it offered two names: Minister of Human Resource Development Arjun Singh and Congress Treasurer Mohtilal Vora. Congress, however, discounted both of them -- Singh in particular due to health problems. It almost seemed that no agreement would be reached until Sonia Gandhi pulled her wild card, current Rajasthan Governor Pratibha Devisingh Patil. Not only did Gandhi's nominee win over the Left, she made the announcement of the UPA candidate flanked by Prime Minister (PM) Manmohan Singh, Left leaders, National Congress Party (INC) president Sharad Pawar, Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) president Lalu Prasad Yadav, and Dravid Munetra Kazagham (DMK) Tamil Nadu Chief Minister K. Karunanidhi. (Note: INC, RJP, and DMK are numerically the strongest parties in the Congress lead UPA

coalition. End Note.) With unified support from the UPA and Left and having already captured the BSP electoral votes, Sonia Gandhi has all but ensured Patil's election to the Presidential post.

An Intra-Community Contest: Shekhawat vs. Shekhawat

¶3. (SBU) On election day, slated for July 19, Patil's opposition will be Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. Despite being a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Shekhawat announced his candidacy as an Independent. Being from Rajasthan and the politically influential Thakur caste, Shekhawat expected to pose a serious threat to any UPA candidate by cutting into their vote base and winning Thakurs from other parties. Patil, however is married to Devisingh Ramsingh Shekhawat, also a Thakur and Shekhawat from Rajasthan. Bhairon Shekhawat has lost his caste angle and the race has become an intra-community contest of the son versus the daughter-in-law.

Opposition Remains Uncommitted And Weakened

¶4. (SBU) After reaching an agreement with the Left on a candidate, Sonia Gandhi and PM Singh reached out to the Opposition in an effort to gain consensus. Both Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, L.K. Advani, and former Prime Minister of the NDA government Atal Bihari Vajpayee told Sonia Gandhi and PM Singh that their outreach efforts were too late. NDA leaders will meet on June 18 to decide which candidate they will support. The Shiv Sena, a NDA ally

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and Maharashtrian based party, however, indicated that it would be difficult not to support Patil, a fellow Maharashtrian. The new Third Front, a group of former Chief Ministers, is also expected to meet on June 18 to discuss who they will support.

Who is Pratibha Devisingh Patil?

¶5. (C) Since November 2004, Pratibha Patil has served as the Governor of Rajasthan. Patil is a long standing member of the Congress party and die-hard Nehru-Gandhi family supporter. Elected to the Maharashtra state legislature for the first time in 1962, Patil served five terms in the state legislature, including a tenure as Leader of the Opposition from 1982-1985. In 1985, Patil became a Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha (upper house) and in 1986 she was elected as the Deputy Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha (1986-88). In 1988, she served as President of the Maharashtra Congress Party and then was elected to the Lok Sabha (lower house) in ¶1991. Sonia Gandhi rewarded Patil's Party loyalty by asking her to take over as the Governor of Rajasthan in 2004.

¶6. (C) Patil, 72 years old, is known for her "soft and quiet" nature. However, many Congress party members noted that she has her own independent streak and a steely resolve. This became evident in 2005 when the controversial Rajasthan Anti-Conversion bill came before her for passage and Patil refused to sign the bill. Similarly, during the May 2007 Gujjar reservation agitation, Patil reined in Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje, admonishing her for ineffectively handling the violence.

¶7. (C) Patil was born on December 19, 1934 in Jalgaon, Maharashtra. She received a Bachelors Degree in Law and a Masters Degree in Arts in Mumbai, during which time she was also a table tennis champion. Before entering politics, she was a practicing lawyer and social activist, with a special interest in rural economics and women's education. In July 1965, Patil married Devisingh Ramsingh Shekhawat, a Rajasthani Thakur. Shekhawat, now retired, was a Congress Party Member of the Legislative Assembly in Maharashtra and a

social activist. The couple have a son, Rajendrasingh, a social worker in Jalgaon, who looks after educational institutions set up by his parent. They also have a daughter, Jyoti Rathod, an electronic engineer who lives in Pune. Patil has traveled extensively, including but not limited to: the U.S., U.K., Austria, Japan, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Italy, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Nairobi, Puerto Rico, and Bulgaria. She speaks Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, and English.

Comment: Sonia Pulls the Strings

¶9. (C) Notwithstanding any other upsets or surprises, Patil, with the support of the UPA, Left, and BSP should sail into Rashtripati Bhavan (the President's residence). Patil is a safe choice, whose election will satisfy Sonia Gandhi's rising influence over Indian domestic politics. Sonia Gandhi has astutely selected a candidate she will most likely be able to control; Patil is an uber-Congress and family loyalist. No doubt, Sonia Gandhi also had the future of her son, Rahul, in mind when choosing the non-threatening Patil for the presidency. The one wild card is former Presidential contender Pranab Mukherjee, who will remain in active politics and thereby persist as the leading contender to succeed Manmohan Singh in a future Congress government.

¶10. (C) While Congress will claim a victory in the election outcome, the negotiations reminded Sonia Gandhi that Congress can not operate without support from the Left. The Left stopped Congress from moving forward with several of its first choice candidates. Congress was forced to not only negotiate with its allies and the Left, but toss those aside,

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and dig deeper for more names to clinch the deal. We will likely see the Left continue to flex its muscles. Whereas the Left agreed to a Congress candidate for President, they might be more insistent on one of their own for Vice President in August.

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